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Voices talk, hands write: Sustaining community publishing with people with learning difficulties

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Abstract: *People with learning difficulties are generally a marginalised section of the community whose care environment often segregates them from other people. One way of broaching this invisibility is by developing a writing and publishing group which can present at community events and may be a means of educating others. However, such groups can be difficult to sustain.*

This article, based in part on a keynote address at the 2006 Groupwork Symposium (Pollard, 2006a), explores the origin and continuing development of a community publishing project with people with learning difficulties in Grimsby. Taking account of the difficulties of recording community based action, it reviews the outcomes 3 years after the initial set up project ceased.

Keywords: *Groupwork; learning difficulties; creative writing; community publishing; participation, social identity*

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Introduction

Voices Talk, Hands Write (VTHW) is a writing and community publishing group of people with learning difficulties based in Grimsby. The group was established in 2003 through a project whose main partners were North East Lincolnshire County Council and the Federation of Worker Writers and Community Publishers (FWWCP). In the first phases the writing group was heavily supported with volunteers and support workers. When the initial funding expired in early 2004 a smaller number of these (JB, MM and JW) continued to work with VTHW members to sustain the project. Although they did not have training, they have provided continuity for the group through their consistent support and their initiation of many ideas for activities and obtaining financial resources.

A common experience of arts projects and other forms of community development is that they can prove difficult to sustain. The workers who were involved at the beginning move on and the money dries up (Andrews et al, 2006). Interest wanes, continuity is lost, people drift away and an opportunity for community engagement no longer exists. People with learning difficulties in particular lack opportunities for community based meaningful activities (Dowling et al, 2006). VTHW's survival has depended on the commitment of a small number of untrained volunteers and the sense of achievement members derive from its activities and its function as a social network.

These aspects of the group were planned in at the beginning of the project, but the maintenance of the supporting ethos has been enabled through the establishment of a group identity and the development of individual self awareness. The main vehicles for this have been creative expression and dissemination through performance and publication.

Background: Learning Difficulties, reading and listening difficulties

The large institutions that once housed people with learning difficulties in the UK have arguably been replaced by many smaller institutions, segregated from the communities in which they are sited (Thompson, 2001). Everyday life choices and occupational activities such as going out

socially or doing some shopping often have to be negotiated with care workers. (Dowling et al, 2006). Many of the relationships people with learning difficulties have with other people are professionally mediated. Often the people they know are those being paid to provide them with care. They are misunderstood and excluded from the possibility of forming the community and family networks which are the basis of social capital (Putnam, 2000). This presents a major problem for inclusion, citizenship and the implementation of what the Government has called 'person-centered planning' (DoH, 2001; Osgood, 2003; Andrews et al, 2006; Dowling et al, 2006). It separates people with learning difficulties from the social world around them, compromises their ability to express their identities, and reinforces a culture of limitation (Sampson, 1998; Osgood, 2003; Dowling et al, 2006). Though some adult educators and arts workers have facilitated people with learning difficulties in the production of community publications (e.g. Milsom and Gadd, 1990; Taylor, 1992; Fullman, 1996; The Thursday Club, 2002), even in these forms which are concerned with marginalised experiences, their unmediated voices are largely missing from cultural expression (Bornat, 1992; Osgood, 2003).

Without attempts to engage marginalised groups and enable their narratives to be documented they remain silent and their needs are ignored (Osgood, 2003; Aubrey, 2004; Dowling et al, 2006). People with learning difficulties often lack the skills and facilities for communication and have not been encouraged to develop or maintain these skills (Thompson, 2001; Osgood, 2003). The voices of others with disabilities have often been ignored, dismissed or directed away from taboo subjects which many other writers tackle, such as sex, behaviours connoting some form of risk and the experience of disability itself (Lewis, 2002; Osgood, 2003). These imposed limitations on expression both serve and are the product of the stigmatisation of disability (Goffman, 1968; Osgood, 2003). The use of writing and publishing enables the participant to imagine and create new possibilities for themselves (Mattingly, 1998) and articulate them in the real world in a concrete form:

Publication is the principal post-writing activity for the serious writing program; it is intended to demonstrate a regard for the students' work, treating their word as if it counted in the world (citing Willinsky, 1990, pp.186-187).

The process of setting something down and having it taken seriously is the source of the empowerment offered by writing (Taylor, 1993). Writers offer themselves as witnesses to the truth of their experiences (Ragon, 1986) and therefore present a provocative challenge to other truths (Garro and Mattingly, 2000). Given this it seems more appropriate to consider VTHW as working through a social action process centered on an artistic 'ownership' (Sampson, 1998, p.74) and therefore more a practical rather than a therapeutic intervention (Aubrey, 2004). Though an extensive and growing body of professional literature describes the use of creative writing in a range of therapeutic settings (for example, Hunt and Sampson, 1998; Bolton, 1999; Philips et al, 1999; Sampson, 2004a) community publishing is practically absent from the therapeutic application of writing, partly due to important considerations such as confidentiality (Bolton, 1999). Since VTHW wanted to be identified as the authors of their work consent forms were used for publications and photographs. Without acknowledgement of individuals' authorship it would have been difficult to realise the full benefits of these experiences.

VTHW members do not consider themselves as therapeutic clients but as writers. VTHW were involved in a writing process which aimed at developing their active consciousness and capacity for determining their needs as part of the process of sustaining their independence (Mies, 1993; Mattingly, 1998). The group continues to enable its members to participate in publications and other community activities which afford them the significant experience of having their creative abilities *as writers* to be taken seriously (McDowell, 1998; Sampson, 1998).

Confidentiality

One of the concerns that can arise with respect to producing publications from creative writing groups in care settings is that of confidentiality. In order to gain the most from the experience of being authors and to enable the participants to be autonomous in their relationship with the community Voices Talk Hands Write have constituted themselves as an independent group, although they meet at a social services centre. Decisions about the way the group relates to the community around it, for example, whether to participate in a community event are decided

by vote. This article has been produced in consultation with the group, who are also named as collective authors of this paper.

Both as writers and as advocates of writing for people with learning disabilities VTHW members exercise the right to be identified in order to share in the public recognition of the group and their achievements. Their authorship is not tokenism since nothing could have been written about VTHW without their participation and creation of the events and processes any publication describes. A condition established with the group from the initial stages is that every paper or chapter written has to be permitted by group members. This does not mean that they will read the paper in detail, but that opportunities to publish, use of individual names, broad content and the purpose of a publication is discussed with them for their approval or refusal. The use of any income derived from publication is also determined by VTHW. This approach was agreed in the initial negotiations with North East Lincolnshire County Council social services before discussion with the group.

Discussion takes place in group meetings and also individually, for example, permission to use sections of a story someone has written. There have been challenges over representation, for example group members were dissatisfied with a report in a council newsletter which did not sufficiently recognise their participation. They met with the press officer to correct this on their own initiative. VTHW members have also questioned the length of the publication process for the book chapters.

Combining research approaches with practicalities

The practical steps taken to accommodate the community publication aspect by developing VTHW as an independent, self constituted group were not only concerned with the ethic of participation, but were also a significant element of VTHW's survival. They allowed the group to work with volunteers who, though they had no formal training, had considerable community publishing and local arts experience. The project was not primarily conceived of as a research exercise but a socially committed writing and publishing development which also contained aspects which could be studied and evaluated, including an opportunity to enact person-centered elements of the recent policy

document 'Valuing People' (DoH 2001). There were many stakeholders (local council social services, a healthcare trust, funding bodies, an adult education college, community publishing organisation and its member groups), and the funding opportunity of year-end monies being available in a short time window. Evaluating a process driven project like VTHW lacks an external control because the activity is embedded in real life issues, a 'cycle of action' (McDermott, 2005, p.101) in which everyone involved is a participant (Grainger, 1999).

Chesler (1991) remarks on the need for researchers working with self help groups to be able to adopt methods that suit not only the needs and resources available to themselves and their participants but the future uses to which research outcomes will be put. These may differ from the needs of a centrally promulgated scientific discipline; the argument is significant here because the project was developed around the needs of a specific and marginalised community whose needs as people with learning difficulties are often interpreted for them rather than negotiated with them. Moreover, VTHW are a community of people centered around creative writing and publishing. While at one level this activity has been about the production of individual narratives, it also concerns an open ended process through the creation of a group narrative which includes everyone connected to VTHW (Mankowski and Rappaport, 2000). Although there were some objectives set for the socially committed publishing project, such work can produce many unpredictable and individual outcomes, for example, occupational spin-offs, affirmative experiences or recognitions of ability which are not anticipated (Rebeiro and Cook, 1999) and the sense of purpose and meaning derived from the shared 'doing being and becoming' and belonging (Wilcock, 1998; Hammell, 2004) of group activity.

Dissemination

The dissemination of this project is largely a problem of bringing about an 'emergent narrative' (Mattingly, 2000, p.205) which arises from the immediacy and improvisation of group situations. Enabling both the dissemination of lived experience and its ownership has been a central issue to every aspect of VTHW's work. Emergent narratives are fragile and susceptible to being misconstrued through the use of

inappropriate criteria or instrumental concepts that lack sufficient sensitivity to the nuances they contain. This issue extends to discussion of the underpinning FWWCP working knowledge base which has only just begun to be articulated as organized explication (Detweiler and Peyton, 1998). Part of the FWWCP rationale for the development of the project was to make community publishing practices more available by producing publications about them in professional journals outside the small readership of its own magazine, *Federation*, and the community arts press. The main theoretical model for this project derived from practices of community publishing within the FWWCP, knowledge of which was contained mostly in a twenty year old anthology (Morley and Worpole, 1982), and a long process of experience, showing, telling, and finding out shared by its members. It was situated outside both pedagogy and cultural norms, being rarely written down and objectively described (Woodin 2005a, 2005b, 2005c, 2007). It was therefore felt that an approach based in participation and action was indicated to capture this rich vernacular data of lived experience. This might best be described as a process model based in authenticity (McDermott, 2005), or to put it more directly, to do some writing and community publishing and record everything that happened as objectively as possible.

Some elements of the initial project derived from an occupational perspective of creative writing, stemming from a human behaviour of using narratives to make sense of the world, which was itself informed by community publication. Pollard (2004a, 2006b) has argued that writing activities are centered on a fundamental making of the self, a process of discovering through creative acts what is hidden from the self and the community, consequently organisational objectives and policy should not obstruct the simple process of telling stories. Consequently the research process itself has had to take second place to the main objective of enabling the group to write and publish.

Recording involvement in writing and writing groups can be a chance process. Evidence of the organisation and the development of writing as cultural action is often ephemeral, more based in memory and experience than document (O' Rourke, 2005; Woodin, 2005a, 2005b, 2005c, 2007). Similar issues have been identified with recording and disseminating the experience and knowledge which is embedded in practitioners' narratives of common sense everyday interaction in accounts of professions such as social work (Tice, 1998) and

occupational therapy (Mattingly, 1998; Detweiler and Peyton, 1998). There has to be a balance between professional explanation and the practical simplicity which sustains the activity and makes it possible (Pollard, 2004a, 2006b). In the here and now of client contact and the participative context of a community publishing group external professional hierarchies and administrative processes are not a usual concern.

VTHW and the community publishing experience

The FWWCP was a network of writing, publishing, adult literacy and local history groups which formed in 1976 to promote what it called working class writing (Morley and Worpole, 1982), but gradually extended its notion of class to incorporate a diverse range of fellow travellers in experiences of exclusion (Courtman, 2000; FWWCP, 2005; Woodin, 2005a, 2005b, 2005c, 2007). By the 1990s, when the Survivor's Poetry network (an organisation which used forms of cultural action to address the stigmatisation of mental health issues) became active in its development, the emphasis within the organisation was on the diversity of experiences it represented, as 'making writing and publishing accessible to all' (FWWCP, 2005; Woodin, 2005a, 2005c). At the start of the project groups within the FWWCP had been working on literacy and publishing projects with people with learning difficulties for some years (for example, Taylor, 1992; Fullman, 1996; Smart, 2005).

As far as possible the volunteers have tried to maintain VTHW on the lines of their experiences of community writing and publishing groups. These groups tend not to be pedagogic, so are not facilitated by a 'tutor' (Woodin, 2007), though VTHW sessions are convened by one of the volunteers while the others work with members to facilitate participants in concentration, assist with spelling or reading. Workshops are concerned with critical reflection on personal and community experiences. Everyone is encouraged to take responsibility for offering constructive comments to enable the participants to produce writing which they feel is satisfactory enough, for example to perform in a public reading or use in a community publication (Pollard, 2006b). The process of publication is often also participatory (i.e. the group play a

part in deciding what is included in a book or magazine as representative of their work as a whole) at every level of the community publishing process because groups often lack financial resources and have to acquire and pool skills such as desk top publishing and managing distribution (Pollard, 2003, 2004b, 2004c; Woodin, 2007). Authorial participation and control over the product and its representation of individuals or communities is far closer than in commercial publishing (Morley and Worpole, 1982; Pollard, 2004b, 2004c; Woodin, 2005b, 2007). The writing is thus interrogated and then disseminated to build an awareness of community issues. Often such publications have encouraged local people to become involved in adding their narratives to the community canon of history, autobiography, and other literature (Woodin, 2005a, 2005b, 2005c, 2007).

This anarchic here and now capacity of a group to recognise its capabilities for itself and to enact them is potentially very empowering (Graeber, 2004). Community publishing, by nature, is often collectively organised and takes place in dispersed localities determined by local needs, the facilitation of creativity, accommodating the diverse needs of individuals in the conduct of workshop forums (Morley and Worpole, 1982; Courtman, 2000; Woodin, 2005c, 2007; Pollard, 2006b). It is a practical approach to developing local forms of information. Understanding and implementation has varied widely from group to group; the FWWCP provided a network, but otherwise one community publisher or writers' workshop would not necessarily be in contact with others or become familiar with their work. Consequently it is difficult to shoehorn the results into a narrow determination of form but there are strong accents on accessibility, facilitating the exchange of narratives of experience, and respecting the principle of participation. The fact that VTHW's volunteers are untrained and have had to improvise much of their development of activities with the group has not compromised the quality of the group's experience. The vernacular form of community publishing belies a considerable and essential depth of facilitation which has not been accommodated in the traditional understanding of artistic or literary practices (Morley and Worpole, 1982; Woodin, 2005a). Community 'publishing' includes any means by which an account of experience is presented to an audience. Similarly, the concept of 'writing' includes transcription of someone else's oral account. Lacking the physical ability to write, an alphabet or access to a means of print

does not prevent someone from being a worker writer or community publisher (Smart, 2005; Pollard, 2006b).

Some central processes and characteristics of the FWWCP's experience are akin to Frierean conscientization (Freire, 1972; Morley and Worpole, 1982; Courtman, 2000; Pollard, 2004c, 2006b; Woodin, 2005a, 2005b, 2005c, 2007), in which awareness-raising is followed by action. These processes, including those experienced in the initial stages of work with VTHW, are some of the underpinnings used by Kronenberg and Pollard (2005) in their political Activities of Daily Living (pADL) tool for political reasoning, which explores how the actions of community engagement through groups can be used to develop empowerment. There are close parallels in these practically driven processes with the concepts of social action, and consequently, potential to exposure to the same criticisms as those depicted by Aubrey (2004), particularly the need to engage with 'why' questions, as will be explored. However, these forms of action, applied in the context of learning difficulties take Sampson's initiation of the recognition of authorship (1998) and make them into the most appropriate form of evaluation, i.e. dissemination (Sampson, 2004b). The group's own publications stand for themselves.

Community publications are produced in small numbers. Although the first VTHW anthology (2004) had a print run of approximately 300, the intense local distribution of such numbers can achieve more readers within a specific area than best selling publications sold on a national scale. The full process of dissemination can continue long after the initial rush of sales. Most library services maintain a local studies section which provides a resource for local historians through which publications can provide a permanent record of material and events that may otherwise quickly disappear. All these forms of publication and dissemination are important elements of evidence recording participants' active citizenship. They are part of the scope for acquiring facilitative skills, personal development opportunities and knowledge acquisition arising from community publication (Woodin, 2005a, 2005b, 2007) through community and social engagement, or what Rebeiro and Cook (1999) has called 'occupational spin-offs'. These underpin the main purposes of a central action, and contribute to the sense of worth participants experience from involvement.

How VTHW began

During the 1990s and early part of this century the FWWCP responded to its expanding and increasingly diverse membership by trying to find ways to make community publishing more accessible. This was a central aim in its constitution. In 2002 the FWWCP had several discussions around bringing community publishing to people who might not have had the chance to be involved and decided to look for groups who might pilot a national project.

People with learning difficulties in Grimsby were identified through an executive member who worked in social services and was able to make some informal enquiries. These led to discussions with social services management and support workers, and an initial meeting with people with learning difficulties took place in September 2003. There was no specific inclusion criteria for the group, but the seventeen who joined the group in the first weeks had identified an interest in writing creatively, and a small number already did so.

The group met every Friday between 1.30pm and 3.30pm over 14 sessions. Usually between 12 to 14 people with learning difficulties would be present, in addition to five to eight volunteers and as many as three support workers. Fuller accounts of this period of the group's development have been published in Pollard et al (2005) and *Voices Talk, Hands Write* and Pollard (in press).

The first sessions saw the rapid growth and development of a group identity. This was achieved through encouraging the group to identify its own needs and work together to set its own agendas and rules, beginning with whether or not to have a tea break and when this would be. To enable the group to publish its own work, it was facilitated in setting itself up as an autonomous group which was allowed to use the day centre for meetings, but first the group had to make the decision that this was what they wanted to do. Becoming independent meant that individual members were not limited by issues of confidentiality and could decide for themselves whether or not their names and photographs could be included in publications, something which is an important factor in enabling a group to record and promote its activities.

All decisions were made through the group, with notes being kept on a large flipchart for everyone to follow. These flipcharts have been the main recording process, or the 'minutes' of the group. This process

was used to determine whether the project would be written up and published in professional publications, on the basis of co-authorship. Even though they have not actually written the articles they are the authors of the actions the articles describe. VTHW agreed that it was important to encourage other people to develop similar opportunities. They continue to take active steps themselves in promoting writing and performance activities. In this way the group participated in developing and setting some of its own evaluative measures (Sampson, 2004b).

In the last part of each meeting, members would be asked to read back what they had written themselves or have their 'writing hand' do this with them. A decision would be taken about the writing theme for the next week. All the completed work was kept in individual folders so that people had some responsibility for organising their own material.

The funded project culminated in the publication of seventeen individual booklets and a group anthology (Voices Talk, Hands Write, 2004), which was given a civic launch at Grimsby town hall, with readings by many of the contributors. This gained local press coverage in the *Grimsby Telegraph*, and one of the group members gave a radio interview about the publication. The same individual has become a frequent correspondent to the *Grimsby Telegraph's* letter pages on disability issues, and subsequently, on his own initiative, wrote a piece promoting the group for a local charity year book (Haughie, 2005). While the first and second anthology (Voices Talk, Hands Write, 2004, 2006) have been widely distributed in the area, VTHW have also performed their writing at a range of arts and adult education events around Grimsby. All group members have become more confident in reading their own work to audiences. Some individuals who at first needed another person to read with them at the microphone can now deliver their material independently.

'Who knows how long we will keep going but from small seeds large trees grow' (Jim White, 2004, p.31)

The group has always taken an active interest in the way it is represented. NP facilitated a participatory research approach to recording the group's development and activity. His role in the group, as one of the co-authors, has been to liaise with VTHW colleagues throughout the writing process, in describing publication opportunities

before pursuing them, explaining what each draft contains, reporting on the progress of publications and seeking permission for conference presentations based on the group's work. The maintenance of a profile was seen by all the participants as part of the means of sustaining the group. Not all the group members are as interested in this process as others, but some have demanded clearer explanations. Discussion of these issues is raised both with the group as a whole and through talking with individual members while working with them.

VTHW have been enabled to meaningfully participate in aspects of developing their activities and occupational spin-offs arising from them. Many activities, for example, places for outings or social occasions have been suggested by members themselves, but most have been put into effect by those working with the group. In the process of discussing progress with the group there have also been occasions to identify further publication opportunities. The group see maintaining a profile as also enjoyable and exciting, perceiving themselves to be visible members of the community participating in and achieving recognition through local events. Fundamentally, they are engaged in the control and management of the public presentation of their activities and have acted to ensure this several times in the life of the group.

In addition to the impact of their own publications and community involvement an externally significant outcome of the project has been the contribution three members have made with the inclusion of their stories and photographs in the 11th edition of 'Willard and Spackman's Occupational Therapy', an occupational therapy text for students (Voices Talk, Hands Write and Pollard in press). This possibility arose from the publication of their initial anthology (VTHW, 2004), but these three pieces will have a wider, international audience, positively reflecting the creativity of people with learning difficulties to future clinicians and educators.

Sustaining the group

Despite their evident motivation VTHW has depended on a significant amount of facilitation from untrained volunteers. In January 2004 the money supporting the FWWCP input ceased. The local supporters felt obliged to keep the group running since the desire of members

to continue meeting was so strong, but quickly found themselves struggling to sustain it. Although the possibility of the group standing alone had been discussed from the start, those involved had not foreseen the difficulties that the group would have when it came to the practical consideration of ensuring continuity. There had been an intention to secure funding to enable VTHW to attend the FWWCP's Festival of Writing weekend, but this would have demanded too much from the staff support available. It was therefore not possible to realise one of the aspirations for the group of enabling them to join a national network of community publishers and writers. The volunteers and support workers felt abandoned and unsupported by the FWWCP, and the group members also felt that they had been neglected. The possibility of FWWCP membership was not therefore pursued by the group.

VTHW's membership has also changed. Some of the group have got married, others have new jobs, one or two have lost interest or have become involved in other activities, but there are also several new members. With less people involved in supporting the group membership has to be held at around 12, with new members replacing those who leave.

Funding and support

VTHW has been facilitated on a hand-to-mouth basis. The group's regular fortnightly meetings have been maintained through the commitment of three volunteers (JW, JB, and MM), two of whom have disabilities. Usually the group has a social services worker in attendance who has been seconded to deal with any issues that might arise with group members, but they sometimes have had to attend to administrative tasks in a neighbouring room rather than be active in the sessions. Although the volunteers came from writing groups in the area they have had to learn many new skills themselves not only in order to develop a rapport with members and adapt to their individual needs, but also in finding ways to keep the group running. Funding in kind comes from social services in being able to use the room at the day centre and having input from a support worker. One of the volunteers (JW) has been involved in local arts committees, but despite these connections has found that little money is available to support

groups like VTHW. Though a small local arts grant supported a second publication (VTHW, 2006), further material support in kind has been obtained from local businesses (e.g. discounted printing costs), and volunteers have met the cost of stationery and the essential supply of biscuits for the tea break from their own pockets. These issues are part of the experience of belonging to any community publishing group. Most of the small groups in the FWWCP received no external funding as they could not afford to employ workers to pursue grants. Those who did obtain monies were often able to do so because they were made aware of them through informal contacts. Most of the financial support for such writing and publishing groups comes from the group itself through the collection of a subscription in meetings, which then requires the group to set up a bank account, appoint officers to manage it and so on. Bank charges can swallow much of the small sums raised. Given the low financial sums available to the group VTHW has not yet discussed this development.

Maintaining creativity

The volunteer and support workers have sometimes felt themselves to be struggling to develop new creative opportunities and often considered how they might promote more extended and reflective writing in the group, such as that represented in sections of the first anthology (VTHW, 2004). With smaller numbers to facilitate the group, the main form used is the group poem. These involve exchanges with all of the members interacting together, but can leave little time to develop individual work unless the participant takes their exercise book home. Although most VTHW members write independently, others require help.

Developing creative writing with people with learning difficulties takes time and patience. When groups are composing poems the result is frequently nonsensical and whimsical. The writing process becomes less serious and more a vehicle for social banter between the participants. In the short term this can be beneficial, but it restricts opportunities to produce more challenging work or deal with deeper issues as a group. The development of trust between specific individuals to enable effective working depends on achieving a balance between task and humorous exchange. A key element of sustaining involvement

is simple fun (Andrews et al, 2006) and this can engage some members who may otherwise appear unresponsive and need several months before they begin to feel comfortable expressing themselves on paper or verbally. When they do they may require individual input while other individuals are engaged in a group task. Negotiating communication problems and conceptual difficulties can make it difficult to do justice to material which may concern significant events. Sometimes intense and demanding work is required to achieve writing which is satisfactory to the writer.

A sense of identity

While some authors on therapeutic and community based writing have advised that publication can lead to negative exposure (Bolton, 1999; Pollard, 2004c; Woodin, 2005b), or that the association with disability may prevent participants from identifying with the finished product (Fitzpatrick, 1995), the VTHW experience shows that this need not be the case. Like other experiences of the arts in groupwork (Argyle and Bolton, 2004) VTHW has had a transformative impact on its members which goes beyond writing. In recent group discussions about developing a poster and newsletter advertisement to promote VTHW group members have suggested the inclusion of themes such as 'sharing emotions', writing about 'feelings' and 'our lives', and 'going out'.

We did not include a baseline measure of factors like personal confidence or assertiveness at the start of the project; this was neglected because the project was focussed on the writing and community publishing aspects. Moreover, it seems antithetical to introduce questionnaires and other research apparatus into a group experience that has been carefully nurtured. Despite the roles we may have as volunteers, support workers and participants, all of us interact as members of a community publishing group. In community publishing or writing groups there are still particular individuals who may take on more responsibility than others, but the collective nature of the group is more important than the creation of divisions.

This development of VTHW as a social network is very evident. One member worked at a local hairdressers, joining the group as her shift finished to meet her husband who had attended from the beginning of

the meeting. Another member may bring his girlfriend to meet group members. Relatives occasionally drop by as they come to collect some of the participants at the end. Every 'semester' the group takes itself down the road to a local pub which sets an area aside for a social afternoon. Several of the participants are 'regulars' there and a poem by the group for the landlord is given a prominent position in the bar. VTHW also make visits to a range of facilities in the community and write about them in subsequent sessions. The group is therefore at the centre of a network of people who form the core audience for the products of the group. Having the support of this audience sustains the process of reaching out to larger audiences in the community.

In 2005 VTHW produced a series of group and individual calendars bearing photographs of the authors. If there is a question of the visibility of people with learning difficulties, then it is important to feel that oneself is part of the picture, or to celebrate events with pictures that can then be shown to other people later as a talking point. This identity is expressed not by the photographer but by the subject of the photograph, a distinction Hevey (1993) makes. The participants make photographers work to their needs. People in the group make a point of including others in the picture to celebrate friendships, or hold up objects such as certificates that mark their achievements.

One member produced a couple of books of his own writing for small circulation amongst friends and family with the help of a volunteer worker. The second VTHW anthology was launched in 2006. The distribution of these items has not been as extensive as the first anthology since VTHW has not had the access to a wider network it had with the FWWCP. However this is comparable to the locally intense pattern of distribution which other community publishing groups experience. Being part of a self sustaining independent group and being involved in the affairs of the community is perhaps more significant than the number of calendars or booklets sold. Recently for example a VTHW member was one of the judges for a local art and poetry competition. Opportunities of this kind would not have arisen without a public profile for the group.

Conclusion

The experience of VTHW has been one of recognising and taking advantage of the open-endedness of group practices, and retaining an ethos of commitment from people who were situated in the locality. Volunteers have been central to the positive experiences of the group. It has been a real project, based in the life of the community and vernacular models of practice, not limited by therapeutic concerns or subject to organisational orthodoxies. This clearly would not have been possible if those involved had not achieved a rapport with each other, and also felt a benefit from their mutual involvement.

A significant element of the sense of benefit and sustainability has come from the enjoyment of the activities, but this itself appears to be supported by a range of aspects around the dissemination of VTHW outputs over which the participants have felt that they have control. Participants have gained personal confidence through it and feel that what they have been doing has meaning and significance to others. This has not only been through the process of exploring the portrayal in words and images of their own identities within the group and its publications, but by active participation in community events and a fostering of the group's own media awareness through discussing dissemination with members. While the quality of the output may be significant in developing particular aspects of the profile of a group project, the elements of enjoyment, social networking, and enabling the group to determine for itself what it wants to do may be more important.

VTHW has depended on considerable support as the participants with learning difficulties are not able to organise the group themselves without help. Community initiatives do not just happen, but arise out of needs which can involve many different stakeholders. It has not been possible to meet all the objectives intended for the group such as participation in a national network, partly because there were not the resources for such an ambitious undertaking. When the background to a project involves so many people who may have differing facilities for commitment, it is important to plan in responsibilities. Jim White (2004), in an early report on the group, questioned how long the group could keep going. VTHW can foresee difficulties in identifying new volunteers. The sustained success of the group should enable it to gain

support from local services, but without the voluntary support it would not have been possible for VTHW to maintain its independence, have control over its own publications and presentation, and to have achieved as much as it has.

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